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THE ROUND TABLE

A USE FOR THE "JUST-SO STORIES"

We have in our high school at Terre Haute an English course somewhat different from that of other schools of the kind, in that it provides for a required course of twenty weeks in composition. To this course our Junior B's come no better, no worse prepared than any other high-school Juniors would. They dread the beginning, for they have heard how difficult it is to produce anything original—anything beyond a summary of what someone else has already written. They know, too, how terrible are the exercises in Woolley's handbook and how obstinate is the teacher in the matter of correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction. The teacher dreads this start, because she knows what uninteresting subject-matter, what weak arrangement of details, and what abominable sentences will be presented at first for her consideration.

Realizing the existence of this condition of affairs and the fact that, if the work was to accomplish more than the primary aim of giving the youngsters the ability to write a grammatical sentence and a coherent paragraph, some inspiration must be infused, I searched our public library through when I was given my first B-third classes, and settled my choice for material upon Kipling's *Just-So Stories*.

Nor have I since been disappointed in my choice. Every time I use these tales I find in them a fresh value. First of all, there is the matter of plot. A kangaroo being made different from all other animals in a way he hadn't expected and a whale being outwitted by a solitary mariner, afford plots of such original elements, simple analysis, and concrete treatment as fire the vivid imaginations of the youngsters to white heat. It merely remains, then, to temper these imaginations later with such stories as "John Chinaman," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Fight with a Trout," or "The Necklace of Pearls," and the rigid, barren quality of mind gives way to a spontaneous, easy fertility.

The children are not hard to wean away from the "Sunday-school story" plot to this new variety, where there is not always a good poor child abused by a vicious mate and a reward in the end. But they cling tenaciously to a host of superfluous incidents and characters. Let them see that only the 'stute-fish and the mariner were responsible for the whale's difficulty; that the Djinn needed only the man, the dog,

and the horse to teach the camel his lesson; and that the Parsee alone punished the rhinoceros—let them see this and the whole of the unnecessary friends and relatives of the chief actors in their narratives retire quietly as if by magic. With these characters disappears also the unwieldy introduction, as giving rise to them; and particularly so if the attention of the youngsters is called to the fact that very little is known of the camel's past history, or of the leopard's family, or of the jaguar's childhood. The number of incidents used is also curtailed when the children see that the story of "The Elephant's Child" contains only four, "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin," two, and "The First Letter," really only one incident.

The point of greatest weakness with these youthful writers is their conventional phrasing and their limited vocabulary. Every story begins with "Once upon a time" until Kipling's expressions of "In the days when everybody started fair," "In the high and far-off times," and "Hear and attend and listen" are made stepping-stones to such a beginning as this of Poe's: "It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend." Few descriptive adjectives do the youngsters make use of at first; and an apt one or one with a euphonious sound only very rarely. For this reason, we generally go over very carefully in class one of the stories and pick out such expressions as: a blackish, bulgy nose as big as a boot; a wait-a-bit thorn-bush; great grey-green greasy Limpopo River; the precession had preceded according to precedent; and the scalesome, flailsome tail. The children can tell easily enough why they like these combinations; and after imitating them for a while are able to appreciate and take for examples such constructions as: "The thrilling secrets of the birth of time," "the red ruin of his face," "the red-hot wind from the westward was booming among the tinder-dry trees and pretending that the rain was on its heels," and even "on a lone winter evening when the frost has wrought a silence."

In figurative language, too, the *Just-So Stories* afford some pithy examples which make their appeal, both as expressions giving pleasure and as excellent models. Some of these are: "little wavy grey lines on their backs like bark on a tree trunk"; "it tickled like cake-crumbs in bed"; "like a mustard-plaster on a sack of coals"; and "like sunshine sifting through the trees." From these mere comparisons, the children themselves soon turn to Tennyson and Dickens and the other authors they have studied for a wider range and deeper significance in figures.

One other purpose, and not the least important, do these stories

serve—that of creating the habit of concrete, definite expression. It soon becomes quite plain to the youngsters that Kipling gains a great deal of the force by his concreteness, as in: “they were so hungry they ate rats and beetles and rock-rabbits”; “he took flour and water and currants and plums and sugar and things, and made himself one cake which was two feet across and three feet thick”; and “the elephant’s child asked questions about everything that he saw or heard or felt or smelt or touched.” With such illustrations in mind they no longer have their hero go “a long distance” or locate the story in “a small town”; the long distance becomes five dreary miles, and the small town, Cartersville.

EVA A. RUMBLEY

PARAGRAPHS AS TRAINS

Frequently my students, in fun or perhaps in jest, refer to the passing trains as “paragraphs.” An explanation may be found in the following comparison which, with good results, I often enlarge upon in the classroom.

A paragraph is like a train. The train must have an engine just as a paragraph must have a topic sentence, for as the engine supplies the power for the one, so the topic sentence holds the dynamic for the other. Just as a train is made up of a number of different kinds of cars, so a paragraph is composed of a variety of sentences. As in the one, however, the cars must be closely linked, so in the other the sentences must be smoothly joined. As a train must run along a well-prepared track, which has been cut through the hills and bridged over the streams, so the paragraph must follow a well-defined line of thought which has smoothed out the rough places and filled in the valleys. As the one carries the commerce and travel of the world, so the other conveys the thoughts and ideas of the mind.

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COMPOSITION THAT SEEMED WORTH WHILE

Not all high-school pupils write perfunctorily, though I readily admit that many of them do. Very few of us, however, do anything with enthusiasm unless it happens to fit our fancy or appeals to us as being especially worth while. Composition work has to be vital or ten to one the pupil will find it more lifeless than Latin—if one thing